

RELIGIOUS REPRESSION IN THE SOVIET UNION:  
DISSIDENT BAPTIST PASTOR GEORGI VINS

SEPTEMBER 2, 1976.—Referred to the House Calendar and ordered to be printed

Mr. MORGAN, from the Committee on International Relations,  
submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany H. Con. Res. 726]

The Committee on International Relations, to whom was referred the Concurrent Resolution (H. Con. Res. 726) to urge the Soviet Union to release Georgi Vins and permit religious believers within its borders to worship God according to their own conscience, having considered the same, report favorably thereon without amendment and recommend that the resolution do pass.

COMMITTEE ACTION

The original resolution on this subject, House Concurrent Resolution 606, was introduced on April 6, 1976, by Hon. John H. Buchanan, Jr., with 24 cosponsors, including the majority and minority leaders, the majority and minority whips, seven committee chairmen, and other members of the leadership of both parties.

Subsequently, a series of similar resolutions was introduced for the purpose of adding cosponsors. The number of sponsors and cosponsors to date totals 140.

These resolutions were referred to the Committee on International Relations and were subsequently referred jointly to the Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs and the Subcommittee on International Organizations.

The subcommittees held two days of joint hearings, June 24 and June 30, 1976. Witnesses on the first day of hearings included the Reverend Janis Smits and the Reverend David Klassen, Baptist ministers exiled from the Soviet Union now living in Germany; Dr. Bohdan R. Bociurkiw, professor at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. Testifying on June 30 were Hon. John H. Buchanan, Jr., a Representative in the United States Congress from the State of Alabama; Dr. John Dunlop, a professor in the German-Russian Department at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio; Dr. Lev Dobriansky, professor in the

Department of Economics, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.; and George Dobczansky, research director of Human Rights Research, Inc., Washington, D.C. In addition, written statements were accepted for the record from Rev. Haralan Popov, president of Evangelism to Communist Lands, and from the American-Latvian Association, Washington, D.C.

On August 31, 1976 a slightly revised version of the original resolution, introduced as House Concurrent Resolution 726, was referred to the Committee on International Relations.

On September 1, 1976 the full committee met in open session to consider House Concurrent Resolution 726. The committee ordered the resolution favorably reported by unanimous voice vote.

#### PURPOSE OF THE RESOLUTION

The purpose of the resolution is to convey the sense of Congress that the Soviet Union should be called upon to honor its own commitments for human rights and religious freedom contained in its Constitution and in various international agreements which it has signed, including the Helsinki Agreement and the United Nations Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The resolution cites the case of Georgi Vins, the Secretary for the Council of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, as a symbol of the denial of basic human rights by the Soviet Union.

The resolution states that it is the sense of Congress that Georgi Vins should be released from imprisonment and that the Government of the Soviet Union should allow him and all other Christians and other religious believers within its borders to worship God freely according to their own consciences.

The resolution also notes that the activities for which Pastor Vins was sentenced and imprisoned would not be considered crimes in most of the world and under no circumstances could justifiably result in the imposition of such a harsh sentence, and calls for Vins' release on humanitarian grounds because of poor health and the likelihood that he cannot survive his present imprisonment. These latter two provisions were added to the resolution as a result of the testimony received during the hearings, which is summarized below.

#### BACKGROUND

Pastor Georgi Vins, 48, is the best known leader of the 100,000 or more "Initiators," the group which split from the main body of Soviet Baptists in the mid-sixties. This group is sometimes referred to as the "unregistered" Baptists.

Vins was first arrested in 1966 when he helped organize a massive demonstration for civil rights and religious liberty. He and another pastor marched openly into the offices of the Central Committee, were arrested, tried, and sentenced to 3 years in prison. Vins came out with his health severely damaged.

In 1974 Vins was again arrested, this time for continuing to do the work normally connected with pastoral duties in the United States

and almost all other countries—preaching, teaching, writing, evangelizing. After waiting many months for a trial, he was sentenced to five years in prison to be followed by 5 years in exile, with the first part of the term to be served in a “strict regime” labor camp in Siberia.

Vins’ family has suffered much since he was imprisoned. Their furniture was sold to pay court costs, his wife has had a difficult time finding employment, and his children have had educational and employment opportunities closed to them because of their religious activities.

Georgi Vins is both a symbol and representative of a substantial number of believers in the Soviet Union who have suffered imprisonment or other repression because of their religious beliefs and practices.

#### HEARINGS TESTIMONY

Professor Bociurkiw, an authority on religious dissent in the Soviet Union, testified that a traditional definition of religious dissent cannot be applied to Soviet conditions unless the Communist doctrine and Party are seen as occupying the position once held by religion and the Church. In the Soviet Union, all religious teachings and organizations are seen as manifestations of dissent.

Professor Bociurkiw called the Baptist dissent movement “by far the best organized and most active of the contemporary protest movements in the USSR \* \* \* since the early 1960’s.” He noted, also, that “dissent within the Russian Orthodox Church has been of greatest political significance, both in terms of the strength of the Church and the ties forged between the Orthodox protesters and the dissident Soviet intellectuals.”

Testimony of the two exiled Soviet pastors was dramatic. Pastor Smits, a Latvian, said he left the Soviet Union after the government took away his right to preach in early 1974 because he (1) preached in several Republics and cities other than his assigned parish; (2) he asked believers to pray for those in prisons and persecuted; and (3) he permitted individuals below 18 years of age to take part in church activities, particularly to sing in the choir.

Pastor Klassen told of spending 10 years in prison because of his evangelizing and preaching. He outlined tactics of repression of religion by the Soviet government, including taking children away from their parents, for which he said there is photographic and documented evidence.

Smits testified he was a member of the “registered” or officially tolerated group of Baptists while Klassen—like Vins—was a member of the “Initiators,” or “unregistered” group. Smits, however, said the two groups cooperate and have great concern for one another. He described Vins as “one of the most honorable, most devout and most talented pastors.”

Professor Dunlop, an expert on the Russian Orthodox Church, said Orthodox believers, who enter the church through the sacrament of baptism, find their careers suffer because all baptisms are registered.

The believer, he said, “will normally be victimized at work—demoted, refused promotion, fired, or otherwise harassed (it should

be remembered that the State is the sole employer in the country).”  
 Parents who desire to raise their children as Christians—

\* \* \* inevitably encounter the fury of a state which desperately wants to prevent new generations of believers from emerging. Church-related activities which are commonplace in America—Sunday schools, religious youth groups, etc.—are strictly forbidden in the USSR \* \* \*. An uncle who chats about religion with a niece or nephew—with their parents’ permission—is liable to be arrested. Although on paper parents are permitted to raise their children in a religion, de facto they run the risk of being deprived of parental rights. In Soviet schools “scientific atheism” is preached in all textbooks and a course in this subject is required in all institutes of higher learning. A student who takes exception to this slant will not go far in the Soviet school system \* \* \*.

Representative Buchanan, in his testimony, quoted a letter from the Reverend David G. Hathaway, director of Christian Prisoners’ Release International, telling of petitions and demonstrations on Vins’ behalf in several countries. In May, 13 countries took part in a worldwide demonstration with the presentation of petitions totaling more than 600,000 names to Soviet Embassies, requesting the government to release Vins from prison. Fifteen thousand persons reportedly marched in Hyde Park in London and in Dublin a petition was signed by 85 members of the Irish Parliament. In Bonn, Germany, 8,000 gathered for a march and rally while 2,000 marched in West Berlin. A motion on Vins’ behalf is before the British Parliament (No. 68), titled the “Right to Believe.”

Representative Buchanan quoted Article 124 of the Soviet Union’s Constitution:

No one is forced to be a believer or an atheist, to observe religious rites or not to do so.

But, he said, in actual practice evangelism is prohibited; all churches must be registered and approved by the government; no new churches are allowed; pastors are appointed by state committees; church spending is controlled by the state and sermon topics are censored. Informers are reported to be in each congregation and pastors have been accused by their followers of betraying their own people to the authorities.

All of this is in vivid contrast to Lenin’s statements on religion at the time of the Russian Revolution, Representative Buchanan pointed out. It is ironic, he said, that Lenin—who is frequently quoted as supreme authority for Communist faith and practice—is virtually ignored when it comes to his pronouncements on freedom of religion. The Social Democrats, said Lenin, “demand that everyone have the unrestricted right to belong to whatever denomination he pleases.”

Lenin denounced Russia’s laws before the Revolution, “against schismatics, dissenters and Jews,” calling them “shameful,” Representative Buchanan testified. He quoted Lenin as saying “these laws either directly forbid the practice of a certain religion or forbid



preaching it or deprive those who belong to it of certain rights. All these laws are as unjust, as arbitrary and as shameful as can be."

Lenin said: "Everyone must be perfectly free, not only to belong to whatever religion he pleases, but he must also be free to preach his religion and to change his religion," according to the Representative's testimony.

All of the witnesses agreed that despite the Soviet constitutional guarantee for freedom of worship, believers are harassed, watched, and severely limited in the expression of their religious convictions.

#### COST ESTIMATE

Pursuant to clause 7, rule XIII of the House Rules, the Committee finds that this resolution does not authorize the appropriation of any funds, and that no costs would be incurred in carrying out this resolution.

#### STATEMENTS REQUIRED BY CLAUSE 2(1)(3) OF RULE XI OF THE RULES OF THE HOUSE

Pursuant to the requirements of clause 2(1)(3) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives, the following statements are made:

(a) *Oversight Findings and Recommendations.*—No specific oversight findings and recommendations were made.

(b) *Congressional Budget Act Section 308(a) Requirement.*—This resolution does not provide any additional budget authority.

(c) *Congressional Budget Office Estimate and Comparison.*—No estimate and comparison prepared by the Director of the Congressional Budget Office under section 403 of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 has been received by the committee.

(d) *Committee on Government Operations Summary.*—No oversight findings and recommendations have been received which relate to this measure from the Committee on Government Operations under clause 2(b)(2) of rule X.

#### INFLATIONARY IMPACT STATEMENT

There are no funds authorized by this resolution and enactment of this resolution would have no inflationary impact.



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#### GOVT ESTIMATE

Pursuant to clause 1, rule XIII of the House Rules, the Committee finds that this resolution does not authorize the appropriation of any funds, and that no funds would be incurred in carrying out this resolution.

STATEMENTS REQUIRED BY CLAUSE 1(1) OF RULE XI OF THE RULES OF THE HOUSE:

Pursuant to the requirements of clause 2(1) (2) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives, the following statements are made:

- (a) Oversight findings and Recommendations.—No specific oversight findings and recommendations were made.
- (b) Congressional Budget Act Section 202(a) Requirement.—This resolution does not provide any additional budget authority.
- (c) Congressional Budget Office Estimate and Comparison.—No estimate and comparison prepared by the Director of the Congressional Budget Office under section 408 of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 has been received by the committee.
- (d) Committee on Government Operations Summary.—No oversight findings and recommendations have been received which relate to this measure from the Committee on Government Operations under clause 2(1) (2) of rule X.

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